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ABSTRACT

Over 800 studies suggest that students who learn via cooperative learning groups--as compared to competitive or individualistic learning--(1) achieve more; (2) are more positive about school, subject areas, and teachers; (3) are more positive about each other, regardless of ability or ethnic background, handicapped or not; and (4) are more effective interpersonally. Cooperative learning emphasizes the cognitive approach to learning where students actively discover knowledge, gain insight into problems, organize and process information, and direct their own learning. Cooperative learning can be used in the composition class to practice invention techniques, share writing, write together, revise, edit, and discuss material. For the groups to be cooperative, group interdependence and individual accountability must be included in the assignment. Students must know that each member is needed to accomplish the task, and each member must realize that he or she is accountable for some part of the work of the group. Interdependence is established by assigning a group goal such as producing a single paper or set of answers, giving the group a single set of materials, or assigning group roles that encourage participation. Individual accountability is established by requiring that everyone participate in the group. (Appendixes include a number of objectives and tasks adapted for group use.) (HOD)

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CS 208 702

IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS IN THE WRITING CURRICULUM: WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

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As part of my undergraduate degree in teaching, I studied how to teach Values Education or how to increase students' awareness of their mutual existence with other people. Despite this training, my classroom showed no signs of interdependence because each student's grade depended on him or herself. There might have been discussion or study groups, but the end result depended on the individual student producing the facts or skills that I wanted him or her to produce, usually on a test or written assignment.

Then, in the fall of 1981, I registered for a course known as Social Psychology of Education and on that fateful first day was flung into a cooperative learning group. My group, composed of four or five people, had no choice but apparently to accept yet another professor's biases. I asked myself, "Aren't cooperative learning groups simply small groups with a new name?"

To my amazement, my experience embodied much more than simply "working in a small group."

Research indicates that a vast majority of students in the United States view school as a competitive enterprise where you try to do better than the other students, and this expectation is widespread and grows stronger as students progress through school. According to Researchers Roger and David Johnson (1975, 1982), there are three basic ways students can interact with each other as they learn: "They can compete to see who is 'best'; they can work individualistically on their own toward a goal without paying attention to other students, or they can work cooperatively with a vested interest in each other's learning as well as their own. Of the three interaction patterns, competition is presently the most dominant" (1982, pp. 1-2).

A paradox emerges when you look at the vast majority of research comparing student-student interaction patterns. While most teachers stress competition, interaction patterns indicate that students learn more effectively when they work cooperatively. Over 800 studies suggest that students who learn via cooperative learning groups (as compared to competitive or individualistic learning) achieve more; are more positive about school, subject areas, and teachers; are more positive about each other, regardless of ability, ethnic background, handicapped or not; and are more effective interpersonally (Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981). Cooperative learning emphasizes the

cognitive approach to learning where students actively discover knowledge, gain insight into problems, organize and process information, and direct their own learning.

As part of the "process" approach to writing, we as writing teachers have been encouraged to structure opportunities where teachers and students discuss the process they go through as they write. We encourage students to work with prewriting and writing strategies: to brainstorm; to invent numerous tree structures, outlines and lists; to read and react to each other's writing. Teachers such as Moffett (1968), Elbow (1981), Macrorie (1980), and Beach (1981) have promoted the use of student-teacher interaction and student-student interaction in order to promote students' awareness of audience, purpose, and goals as they write. By following their guidelines, we have taken away some of the artificial setting of "writing for the teacher" and have hopefully promoted a more realistic situation of "writing for audiences, purposes, and effects." While we view this approach as vital to our students' cognitive development in understanding writing as a process, we are often at a loss as to how to plan, organize, and evaluate the subsequent interactive sessions. As Holubec (1983) states, "We may glean an idea here or there, and try it. If it works, we are delighted, but if it doesn't, we haven't the slightest idea about how to make it work. In the long run, it may just be easier to teach writing the way we were taught it, rather than to try experiments which may or may not be successful" (p. 35).

I suggest that you follow the cooperative learning group guidelines given below as a step toward an effective use of small group interaction in the teaching of writing. These guidelines will help you design student-student interaction sessions which serve your particular needs and classroom situations.

1. As far as possible, specify the instructional objectives.
2. Select the group size most appropriate for the lesson.
3. Assign students to groups. Usually, you will want to maximize the heterogeneity in the groups.
4. Arrange the classroom. Cluster the groups of students so that they will not interfere with one another. Within the groups, all students should be able to see the relevant materials, talk with one another, and exchange materials and ideas.
5. Explain the task and the cooperative goal structure. Tell students that there is a group goal, that there is a set criteria to meet, and that all group members will be rewarded on the basis of the quality of their group's work.
6. Provide the appropriate materials.
7. Observe interactions between students; keep a tally of types of interactive situations and look for signs of higher ability students aiding lower ability students.
8. Intervene only in the role of a "consultant" who will suggest possible solutions to the groups' questions, and "consult" in a way as to help members learn the interpersonal skills necessary

for cooperating.

9. Formulate an exact statement of the criteria students must meet to demonstrate mastery of the assigned material and evaluate the group product using this set of criteria.

As a composition teacher, cooperative learning can be used to practice invention techniques, share writing, write together, revise, edit, discuss material assigned, etc. For the groups to be cooperative, group interdependence and individual accountability must be included in the assignment. Students must know that each member is needed in order to accomplish the task, and each member must realize that he or she is held accountable for some part of the work of the group. Interdependence is established by assigning a group goal such as producing a single paper or set of answers, giving the group a single set of materials, or assigning group roles which encourage participation. Individual accountability is established by requiring that everyone participate in the group. You can assign individual work as preparation for the group work or appoint each member to fulfill a particular job.

Cooperative learning can be used in various ways throughout all levels of education and all areas of the writing process. In the University of Minnesota Composition Program we encourage the use of conference groups where three or four students and a teacher get together and discuss each other's writing. While I have structured cooperative learning activities for this

curriculum, at the end of this article I will include several activities from a writing unit which I developed for use at the junior or senior high school level. In formulating this unit, I followed the cooperative learning guidelines outlined above. One weakness is that I have not as yet developed a particular set of criteria for evaluating the compositions resulting from these lessons.

As stated earlier, in the past I molded writing instruction into a kind of win-lose struggle which showed whose writing was "best." If I attempted a task which utilized group interaction, its finale invaribly became a contest where each individual student either "made the grade" or "fell further behind."

Instead of continually promoting this struggle, cooperative learning groups are another means of providing challenges to a student's present knowledge. By observing more mature reasoning, a student gains a more mature process of reasoning and thinking. A student needs repeated experiences where he or she is forced again and again to see the perspectives of others. As a means toward better communication and better writing skills in the future, I urge you to follow these guidelines and develop cooperative learning groups in your classrooms.

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From Rackham (1984): **SENSES PERCEPTION** adapted for group use

Objective: During writing class, the student will describe details by using his or her senses, one at a time, by first speaking and then writing down the details in sentences.

Group size: 4-5 students randomly put together, or grouped hetereogeneously, depending on the situation.

Task: Through a cooperative goal structure, do the following:

1. Give one copy of the "Sences Perception Paper" to each group.
2. Each person in the group will listen to what is read, answer aloud, and then jot down the sensory words or sentences which come to his or her mind.
3. Each student must write his or her sensory perceptions in his or her journal for the writing class.

Large group discussion: Anyone can share anything that came out in their group.

Individual homework: Write a paragraph on the sensory quality of something ordinary, for example, a fruit, vegetable, your T.V., refridgerator, sofa, sneakers, anything! Don't do it from memory. Get the object or get near it and make lists, sentences, phrases, thoughts, anything!

Small group (2 people) homework: Take a notebook with you to a laundromat, basketball game, under a tree, to a mall, a lunchroom, park, lab, lake, bus stop, anywhere! Spend 30 minutes (minimum) recording what you see, hear, smell, and feel. Look for the specific, concrete elements that would help you to share the experience with your complete small group. Rewrite this in a paragraph using the most sensory details. No abstractions or generalizations.

Individual homework or a free-writing activity: Recall a good experience in your life caused by a simple event. Write a page or more focusing on sensory details. Begin or end with a generalization that summarizes the total quality of the experience, but use no general or abstract terms in the body of the paper. Write this experience so that you will be able to share it with your small group.

Small group work: Read a section from the literature book which you are now studying from. Pick any section which your group likes. It should not be more than two pages long. As a group, take notes. How many senses are present? Note the generalizations. Where are they used? Why? What proportion of general to specific is present?

Instructions to the groups: You must choose two of the above. You may work them out however you choose, but they must be turned in to me within three days of today's date. All of your names must be on the assignment (if a group assignment is for two people, there should be two names on the paper, etc.).

SENSES PERCEPTION PAPER

SIGHT Describe details of your left hand (color, texture, size, shape, line, knuckles, fingernails, rings, hair, scratches, wrinkles, everything seeable). Share these with your group.

Pick another part of the body and do the same thing. Or, pick out something outside the window or something in the room and describe all of its details.

SOUND Listen! Do you hear any kind of machine? If so, listen and jot down every word that comes to mind as you listen. Unusual words are fine. Then put the sounds into complete sentences. Did you each hear the same machine? The same sounds? Did you hear cars outside? Computers inside? Lawn mowers? Snow blowers?

SMELL Describe a smell, but don't define where it actually came from. See if your language is explicit enough to define the smell. Exchange your description with someone in your group, and see if that person knows what smell you are describing. See if you know what they are describing.

TOUCH Touch something. Describe it in new detail. Keep touching until you come up with 10 to 20 sensations!

TASTE Write about tastes, not reactions as you slowly eat hard candy, the first bite of gum, a swallow of lemonade, toothpaste the morning after pizza. Find words and phrases that say the actual taste, not commercial words!

From Beach (1981): **"What is the Self?"** adapted for group use

Objective: Students will examine their sense of "self" by describing themselves and others.

Group size: 6 students

Task: 1. Introductory lecture on social psychological concepts, pointing out the complexity of the individual.

a. Identification occurs when a student (or any person) tries to be like someone he/she loves or admires. Through identifying, we incorporate other people's qualities and attributes into ourselves. We identify people and ourselves on the basis of: love or liking, admiration for superior competence, anxiety or anger, etc. Identification results in growth as the outer relationship becomes a model for an inner restructuring.

b. Role acquisition includes learning to act, feel, and perceive the world in a manner somewhat similar to that of other people who have similar roles. It requires mastering the needed technical and cooperative competencies and learning what to expect from people in related roles. Through acquiring social roles, we learn large, integrated patterns of consistent behavior which we follow in relationships with other people.

2. Students then introduce themselves (in small groups) stating their age, birthplace, height, address, classes being taken, etc. They then discuss the question, "Is this data vital in understanding the <u>nature</u> of the person?"

3. In a small group, list information that does suggest unique characteristics of "self" (each group member). Perhaps you could give each group a list of ideas such as: adjectives that describe, adjectives that don't; behaviors, hobbies, and possessions; 10 things about oneself which one is proud of; 10 most important things to the person; 10 things the person is <u>not</u> proud of; 10 things <u>not</u> important; drawing a photo of oneself involved in an activity; sayings, ideas, opinions representing the person's philosophy.
The group picks three of the above to do in the small group. They then share what they want to with the group, discussing why this is easy or difficult to do.

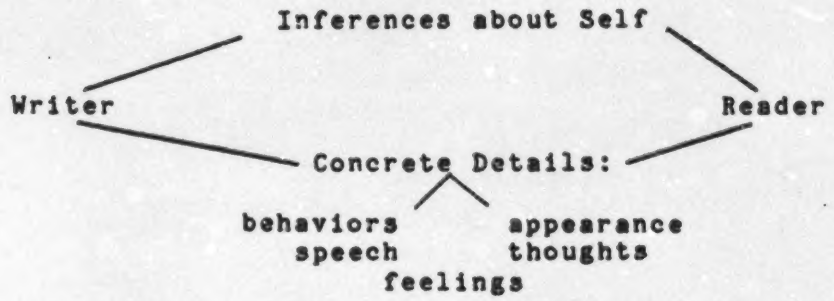
Large Group: Discussion on how the self-concept is related, defined, and shaped by a network of social relationships.

From Beach (1981): "Portraying Self Through Behavior"
adapted for group use

Objective: Students will focus in on inferences about the "self" through concrete details: behaviors, appearance, speech, thoughts, and feelings.

Group size: 5-6 students

Task: Put this chart on the overhead or on the blackboard:



1. Pass out written descriptions of characters or actual persons. (Could use sections from your literature text.) Using the above chart, each small group notes details used to make inferences about the persons.

2. Specific incidents communicate a sense of self. Each student in the group describes a person unknown to the group in terms of incidents. Group discussion on the question:How do some incidents suggest one side of a person and other incidents the other side?

3. Recollection in small groups. Each group discusses what the current moods and attitudes are in society.
Pass out some old photos, newspapers, or listen to older songs which can stimulate memory. (Perhaps some yearbooks, too!)
As the groups exchange these objects, ask the groups to talk about the past experiences which these objects bring tomind.
Talk about behaviors and attitudes <u>then</u> as compared to <u>now</u>.

4. Closer Observation.

a. Speech, style, register, dialect, enunciation. Have students record and transcribe their own conversation with another person from their group. OR Write dialogues that portray friends or fictional characters.

b. Appearance, nonverbal behavior. (Optional)
Observe behavior over a long period of time, noting recurring behaviors. Select particular features.

c. Thoughts and feelings.
Role play situations. Empathize one to one by accurately restating each other's thoughts and feelings.

d. Change and development in persons.
Students compare past and present perceptions of an event, place, or person. Contrast the personal change from past to present. Observe younger brothers or sisters.

5. Different perspectives on self.
Take an experience which you've written about in a past paper and define it in these terms (Burke's Pentad):
agent, act, scene, agency, purpose

NOTE: All of the above activities could take an extensive amount of time to do. Therefore, each group should pick out only two parts of section 4 to do. Also, freewriting should be included during section 3 and perhaps 4d.

Evaluation: Each student should put whatever writing he/she does in his/her journal. At the end of this section on "self", each student should hand in one composition which has stemmed from these discussions, as well as all prewriting which led up to that composition.

From Elbow (1981): **"Loop Writing Process = Control and Creativity"**
adapted for group use

Objective: Students will experiment with the loop-writing process by discussing the different approaches and choosing several to try.

Task: Each small group will receive one copy of the following:

There are 13 procedures to the loop-writing process. Read and discuss these different procedures.

1. **First thoughts** (like a jot list) for 15 minutes. Put down all the thoughts and feelings you have (not <u>good</u> or <u>true</u>, but <u>first</u>!)

2. **Prejudices.** What are your biases? What is most satisfying? Find your point of view or assumptions, then jump into that point of view and write as prejudiced as possible.

3. **Instant Version.** Write a sketch of your final piece. Do this <u>before</u> research. It helps you to get more out of your research later. You will see how close you are before you see others' data.

4. **Dialogues.** Do this if you have 2 or 3 conflicting prejudices. Give each feeling a voice and have them talk to each other. Do this before or after #3 above. Arguments are fertile ground for new insights. Use speech and talking language rather than "essay" language. Generate tension and energy!

5. **Narrative thinking.** Write the "story" of your thinking. Sometimes this helps you to "see" more clearly.

6. **Stories.** Let stories and incidents come tomind and jot them down. What stories strike you about <u>Causes</u>? (When one thing caused another.) What are any memories or experiences you have that relate to your writing?

7. **Scenes.** Stop time. Focus on individual moments. What places, moments, sounds, or moods come to mind?

8. **Portraits.** What people come to mind? Tell their qualities or characteristics.

9. **Vary the Audience.** Write about the topic to someone very different from the actual audience. Write to a child, or to someone with the opposite view. <u>Visualize</u> your audience; write <u>to</u> them.

10. **Vary the Writer.** Take an opposite view. Be that opposite person and write a self-portrait or self-analysis.

11. **Vary the Time.** Write as though you were living in the past or the future. Or write to an audience in the past or future.

12. **Errors.** Write down things that are almost true or trying to be true.

13. **Lies.** Write down odd or crazy things you come up with. You'll discover important assumptions or preoccupations.

Now, as a group, choose the procedures which each person in your group will use as he/she writes.

Begin your writing, following the procedures which your group has chosen (write individually, but each member following the chosen procedures).

The next class period, share your writing with members of your group.

Pick a new partner from your small group and follow the usual peer feedback questions.

Revise and rewrite the paper.

Individual or small group optional exercise at this time:

Read the question groups in Elbow, pp. 82-93 (at the end of this lesson), choose one group of questions, and write/develop a paper from them.

The question groups are on:

someone's life — a self-evaluation — a place
an object — a work of art — an organization or group
a problem or dilemma — an abstract concept

Take either of the above assignments to an audience outside of this class (an unlikely audience). For example, to your next door neighbor, your coach, a local store clerk, your cousin, anyone (but unlikely) and have that person read this writing, but give no feedback. One week later, return to that same person and ask him/her what he/she remembers about your writing. Freewrite on what that person remembered and why you think the particular thoughts stuck in the person's mind.